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Between Indigenous Religion and Religious Minorities: Bonpos' Attempts to Continue Tradition in Contemporary China

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1. Introduction

This paper clarifies how the Bonpos maintain their traditions in the contemporary context through anthropological field research in Amdo Shar-khog (*Shar khog*). It concerns what tradition really means for them, and using the practice of *Sngon 'gro* as an example, we discuss that transcending their own local history and the lama-disciple relationship is one of the essential aspects of maintaining their tradition in the local context.

Many scholars, including both Western Tibetologists and Tibetan scholars, have tried to clarify the actual meaning of *Bon* and its position among the vast Tibetan religious culture. As Kværne (1985: 9-10) indicated, the word *Bon* has had at least three meanings: 1) “ancient *Bon*,” which includes various rituals and worships before the spread of Buddhism, 2) “*yungdrung* (*Gyung drung*) *Bon*,” which gradually systematized their doctrine and monastic system, which was believed to be historically connected with ancient *Bon*, and 3) “nameless religion,” as mentioned by Stein (1993), which includes various non-systematized ritual traditions from around the Himalayan region. These meanings cannot be clearly divided or placed in straightforward historical order. From the viewpoint of Tibetan Buddhist history, contemporary Bonpo tradition has been constructed through the constant influence of Buddhism, for example, *Bon*'s three phases of transformation: *Rdol-bon*, *'Khyar-bon*, and *Bsgyur-bon*. However, as Snellgrove (2010: 1-2) emphasized, the distinction between “old” *Bon* and “systematized” *Bon* (e.g., Hoffman 1961) should not be simply paralleled with that between pre-Buddhist religion and Buddhist-influenced *Bon*; various elements have continuously interacted with one another to gradually form the vast complex of Tibetan religion.

Shifting focus from doctrine to the practice of *Bon* in the contemporary world, the

Bonpos' identity has been broadly discussed. Bonpos are referred as religious minorities because of their small number and limited political presence compared with Buddhists among the Tibetan population. With the spread of Tibetans beyond the national borders in the last century, Bonpos needed to establish their own identity that would be compatible with the Tibetan identity connected with being Buddhist. In this process, based on both the knowledge brought by Tibetology and restored textual and oral knowledge, Bonpo intellectuals have defined *Bon* as the indigenous religion or tradition of Tibet (e.g., Cech 2008; Tsering Thar 2006). Although this definition involves some problem of the actual origin of *Bon*, which concerns the transmission of knowledge from outside Tibet such as '*Ol mo lung ring*', it has become one of the important Bonpo identity markers in contemporary Tibetan society.

This paper tries to clarify what Bonpos in Amdo transmit and preserve through religious practice in the recent socioeconomic context of western China. Bonpos have experienced the age of destruction and the restoration of their religion in the last 60 years, and under rapid economic development, they are seeking the way to maintain their own traditions. In this paper, we define "tradition" not only as the transmission of religious knowledge by professionals but as what monks and laypeople together consider valuable and intend to continue.¹ Focusing on the level of actual religious practice by laypeople and monks in a local community, this paper tries to approach the aspect of religious value shared among them, which is also an essential element of their living as Bonpos.

2. Bonpo in Shar-khog in the age of reform and opening

2.1 Shar-khog and *Bon*

Shar-khog corresponds to the northern part of Songpan (*Zung chu*) County in the Aba Tibetan and Qiang Autonomous Prefecture. As shown in the map, it is situated in the mountainous area of Sichuan Province. The population of Songpan County is 74,213, which includes 32,286 Tibetans (Aba zhou difanzhi bianweihui 2011: 404). Villages in Shar-khog are situated in the wide valley of the Minjiang River and mostly consist of Tibetan residents called Shar-ba (*Shar ba*).

This area is historically a borderland between the residences of the Han people and Tibetans. Several villages made federations called *sho khag*, which were governed

¹ In recent cultural anthropology, a new perspective toward "tradition" in the modern world is suggested: people's acknowledgement and intention of continuity is centered on maintaining "tradition" in the contemporary world through symbiotic relationships with other cultures or modernity (Yamada 2011: 264).

by local lords called *'go ba*. Each federation had its own monasteries and the worship of the holy mountains. These monasteries and the lives of the monks have depended on contributions by laypeople. In former times, the laypeople made their living as middlemen of trade who carried tea, which was transported from Yunnan by Han merchants to the northern nomadic area.

Since the foundation of the People's Republic of China, their main occupation has shifted to the cultivation of barley and the gathering of medical herbs. The latter in particular is an important activity by which laypeople acquire cash income. Some of the households keep cattle and sheep to graze in the pastures on the high plateau, but these have decreased in recent years.



Map: Location of Shar-khog

In addition to these traditional ways of living, village residents have taken up jobs associated with tourism. This trend has been promoted by the development of the Jiuzhaigou and Huanglong natural reserves, which were registered as UNESCO World Natural Heritage areas in 1992. In particular, tourism development in Huanglong, which is located to the east of Shar-khog and situated under the holy mountain *Shar dung ri*, has provided new opportunities for the people. For instance, people work in restaurants and hotels in a number of towns, in the tourism centers in the national reserve as guides and maintenance staff, or at the Jiuzhai Huanglong airport, which opened in 2003. In addition, they also sell medical herbs, and the cash income from

these occupations has economically supported the laypeople, which consequently sustains the monastic activities as well.

Shar-khog has been known as a place with a majority population of Bonpos. The worship of the holy mountain and the monastic life have been the core of their religious activity. There are 12 *Bon* monasteries in Shar-khog, including one nunnery (Tsering Thar 2003). The most distinctive characteristic among those monasteries is their historical connection with '*Phags pa rnam gsum*, who are legendary *Bon* saints from the 11th and 12th centuries in Amdo.² Because they are believed to have built several monasteries and sacred places, it is suggested that the historical background of *Bon* around Shar-khog is slightly different from that of central Tibet, which is characterized by the monastic traditions of *Gyas ru dben sa kha* and *Sman ri* monasteries, which originated from *Bru* lineage. Although the center of *Sman ri* tradition moved to India in the mid-20th century, monasteries in Shar-khog continue their practice of *Bon* in contemporary China in addition to maintaining influential monasteries in eastern Tibet such as *Snang zhig* monastery in *Rnga ba*³ (Des Jardins 2009).

Skyang tshang monastery, which is the main subject of this paper, was established in 1268 by *Bsod nams bzang po*, who is from the *Sgur skyang* lineage in *Mdzod dge*⁴ and is believed to be a fifth-generation descendant of one of the '*Phags pa rnam gsum*, *Skyang 'phag*. The monastery is situated on the borders of the lay village and a highway that connects Chengdu and Jiuzhaigou. It consists of places for communal rituals such as the assembly hall ('*du khang*) as well as an institution for monastic education where novice monks live and study together. There were 94 monks in the monastery, including roughly 40 novices, in 2009. The abbot and the *lopon* (*slob dpon*, head teacher) are the leaders of the monastic community, and under them the administration committee (*siguanhui*), comprising senior monks, is responsible for the management of the monastery.

The monastery is surrounded by three villages that formed a federation before the 1950s and that still have a very close relationship with the monastery. For example, most of the monks of the monastery are from these three villages, and laypeople make regular donations to the monastery, especially during large festivals and also for the daily rituals performed by the monks at each household. Under the contemporary

² *Mdo smad g.yung drung bon gyi lo gyus* mentions 9 monasteries in Shar-khog that have been succeeded by the lineage of '*Phags pa rnam gsum*: *Skyang 'phags*, *Gtso 'phags*, and '*Do 'phags*.

³ *Rnga ba* corresponds to Aba County in the Aba Tibetan and Qiang Autonomous Prefecture.

⁴ Ruor or Gai County in the Aba Tibetan and Qiang Autonomous Prefecture.

socioeconomic circumstances, monks and laypeople together have inherited their own religious tradition. As we discuss later in this paper, the tradition was constructed not just in a closed local community but through continuous contact with the outside world.

2.2 From the revival to the maintenance of tradition under economic development

Having moved to its current location in 1916, the monastery has undergone the ages of both destruction and revival through the 20th century. Since the foundation of the People's Republic of China, traditional religious activities have been strongly influenced by national policies. Most monasteries among Tibetan residences stopped their social activities from the 1950s to the 1970s. Regarded as a symbol of the old political and economic systems, they were incapacitated because of the destruction of their buildings and the forcible return of monks to secular life. *Bon* monasteries in Shar-khog were no exception.

From the establishment of the “reform and opening” policy in 1979, religious activities were officially permitted and the reconstruction of monasteries started. The monasteries were reconstructed in the 1980s, soon after the resumption of the pilgrimage to the holy mountain (*gnas ri*) *Byang bya dur* in 1980 (Huber 1998; 2002). At first, because only one monastery was permitted to be built in the region, *Dga' mal* monastery at the foot of *Byang Bya Dur* was newly built with collaboration between the monks from all of the monasteries. Then other monasteries were gradually reconstructed as authorized by the government.

Skyang tshang monastery also reconstructed its buildings, rituals, and monastic education beginning in the mid-1980s. The stages of revival can be divided into three: 1) from the 1980s to the mid-1990s, 2) from the late 1990s to the mid-2000s, and 3) from the late 2000s to the present time.

In the first phase, the main basis for religious practice was reconstructed. Monks and laypeople cooperated to restart annual and daily rituals and rebuilt the assembly hall. In this process, the relationship between the monastery and the lay community, in which the laypeople economically support the monastery and in return the monks conduct various rituals for communal and personal welfare, was reconstructed. This also meant that the social order within the village was reorganized based on contributions to the monastery, such as the amount of donations (Schrempf 2000).⁵

The second phase is characterized by the establishment of institutions for monastic education. In the early 1980s, young monks began to study at *Dga' mal*

⁵ Schrempf (2000) argued that the amount of the donations to the annual ritual is closely related to the social prestige of the villagers, taking the case of *'chams* at *Dga' mal* monastery as an example.

monastery, where intellectuals who had inherited religious knowledge taught before the 1950s gathered. After the reconstruction of their own monasteries, monks personally found lamas from the older generation to study under them. However, in approximately the mid-1990s, these older monks began to gradually pass away and the demand for a new system of monastic education increased. Consequently, a new *lopon* (b. 1968) from the younger generation was elected, and he founded a school for the education of young monks supported by locals and prominent monks around Shar-khog.⁶

Then in the third phase, people in Shar-khog came to face the rapid economic development that enveloped all of China in recent years. The economic development impacted the people of Shar-khog in two ways: an increase in their cash income and circumstances with tourism. From the early 2000s, the central government has promoted “the Great Western Development Strategy” (*Xibu Dakaifa*), and extensive development, including tourism, improved the people’s living standards by creating new job opportunities. As statistical data show, the GDP of Songpan County increased four times from 1997 to 2007 and the service industry, including tourism, accounted for roughly 60% of the GDP in 2007 (National Bureau of Statistics of China 2007).

Because Shar-khog is located near the famous tourist places Jiuzhaigou and Huanglong, Tibetan monasteries are also regarded as important attractions for the tourists who visit this area. The Jiuzhai Huanglong Airport, opened in 2003, has also made it easier to reach the area. However, the villagers’ sudden contact with such a great number of outsiders, including tourists and development agencies, caused several conflicts between them (e.g., Baimacuo 2004). At *Skyang tshang* monastery, in the face of too many tourists and too much commercialization, an argument over maintaining a quiet environment for the monks arose and finally the monastery closed its doors to visitors. After this, the monastery lost its own source of income, but the laypeople who economically support the monastery have gained relatively stable incomes through development and tourism.

The monastery has mostly completed the reconstruction of its outer and inner facilities for the practice and succession of their religious tradition over the last 30 years, and people’s interest has gradually shifted to the maintenance and development of the monastery.⁷ Backed by the continuous economic development, some rituals of the monastery have been held on a much larger scale in recent years. Furthermore, these are not conducted for visitors but mainly for the local community.

⁶ For more on the reconstruction of monastic education, please see Konishi (2009).

⁷ This is also a general tendency of monasteries around eastern Tibet (Yamada 2008).

3. The universality and regionality of *Bon*

As we have seen so far, Bonpos in Shar-khog have revived their religious activities in spite of the rapid social and economic changes of the last 30 years. However, these are not exactly the same as the practices of former times. The most distinct difference is the absence of the '*go ba*', who was the most powerful patron of the monastery. The '*go ba*' had the authority to appoint the abbot of the monastery as his lama, and some of the elected abbots were even his family because his family was believed to have a close relationship with the lineage of the founder of the monastery. Then the population of '*go ba*' dwindled in the 1950s, meaning that an "authentic" successor of the monastery was lost along with the basis of his authority. In fact, the seat of the *khri 'dzin* ("throne holder," the highest position of the monastery) in the assembly hall has been vacant since the 1980s, and the abbots elected by endorsement have not occupied the seat.

Lacking the authentic axis of the monastery, what guarantees the continuity of tradition among local Bonpos? It is primarily religious texts and knowledge inherited from before the age of destruction, and this complex of knowledge includes both universal and regional aspects of *Bon*.

The universal aspect concerns the doctrine and texts systematized in the *Sman ri* monastery, which have been the most influential standard among Bonpos everywhere. Since *Shes rab rgyal mtshan* (1356–1415) succeeded the tradition of *Gyas ru dben sa kha* monastery of *Bru* lineage and founded *Sman ri* monastery in the 15th century in the Tsang district, the monastic discipline and education system have included dialectics that were developed there. Along with *Gyung drung gling* monastery, which was established by *Zla ba rgyal mtshan* (1796–1862), *Sman ri* has been the *Bon* doctrine's center of study and education for many generations. Eventually, monks from these two monasteries established the new *Sman ri* monastery in India in the 1970s that has retained its position as the influential center of *Bon* through the publication of texts and monastic education based on the lineage of *Shes rab rgyal mtshan*.

Although they have different origins, *Skyang tshang* monastery has historically maintained a close relationship with *Sman ri* monastery. According to the history of *Skyang tshang* monastery (*Skyang tshang dgon gi byung ba*: 138), the 9th abbot, *Gyung drung bstan 'dzin* (1654–1723), visited *Sman ri* monastery and studied under the 15th abbot, *Gyung drung tshul khrim* (1667–?).⁸ Thereafter, several abbots visited central Tibet and *Sman ri* to receive various teachings. In particular, the 17th abbot, *Bstan 'dzin*

⁸ He became the abbot of *Sman ri* in 1706 (Kværne 1971: 169).

blo gros rgya mtsho (1889–1975), studied at *Gyung drung gling* and received the title of *rab 'byams pa*. He then became a fully ordained monk at *Sman ri* monastery and returned to Shar-khog with 29th *Sman ri* abbot *Shes rab blo ldan* (1882–?). They broadly transmitted the knowledge from *Sman ri* to *Skyang tshang* and the school of dialectics developed. Disciples of *Bstan 'dzin blo gros rgya mtsho* later played important roles for *Bon*: the 33rd *Sman ri* abbot *Lung rtogs bstan pa'i nyi ma*, the famous Tibetologist Samten Karmay, *Blo bzang rgya mtsho* who became the 19th abbot of *Skyang tshang* when reconstruction was started in the 1980s, and so on. Thus, a close relationship between these monasteries developed. For example, this is expressed in a recitation of the monastic rules (*Bca' yig*) of *Sman ri* (*Sman ri'i bca' yig*) in front of all monks of *Skyang tshang* during *'cham* in the second month of the Tibetan calendar.

On the other hand, *Bon* has regional aspects, namely, the varied background of the monastery based on the local history and surroundings. As for *Skyang tshang* monastery, the bond with other monasteries that formed through their common lineage originating from *Skyang 'phags* has played an important role during the revival of religious activity. Among several places that share the same origin, the monastery has had a particularly close relationship with two monasteries in *Mdzod dge*, *A skyid skyang tshang* and *Sgur ba skyang tshang*. They developed a strong connection through kinship and also constituted a network of monasteries covering the area of Shar-khog, *Mdzod dge* and *The bo*.⁹ Despite the extinction of the actual kinship, the historically constricted network is still remembered and effective. For example, *Skyang sprul Dri med 'od zer* (1933–), who is a reincarnated lama from *A skyid skyang tshang* monastery, eagerly supported the reintroduction of monastic education at *Skyang tshang*. Consequently, in recent years quite a number of young monks from *Mdzod dge* and *The bo* have come to study at the monastery.¹⁰

In addition to this, there are local deities such as *gzhi bdag* and rituals related to them for the protection of each village. In Shar-khog, each *sho khag* has a mountain honoring its *gzhi bdag* where laypeople annually make offerings at *la btsas*. In recent years, monks from the monastery also participate in rituals. As previous studies revealed (e.g., Karmay 1998), these “mountain cults” strengthen solidarity among the laypeople and develop the local identity. In addition, pilgrimages to the holy mountain¹¹

⁹ Corresponding to Diebu County in Gansu Province.

¹⁰ For more on the function of networks of monasteries on the revival of bon in Shar-khog, please see Konishi (2010).

¹¹ In Shar-khog, there are two *gnas ri*, *Shar dung ri* and *Byang bya dur*, and they are connected to the ritual cycle of *Ma rgyud*.

gather people from every village and function as a symbol for all of Shar-khog.

Thus, the tradition they continue consists of various elements based on the universal and regional aspects of *Bon*. These cannot be completely separated; they have interacted with each other for centuries and created the flow of the tradition. Next, we are going to focus on the lama-disciple relationship to consider how the tradition is expressed and transmitted at the level of actual religious practice. Here, the lama-disciple relationship is not limited to professional monks but includes laypeople with influential *lopon*.

4. Confirming and inheriting tradition through the practice of *Sngon 'gro*

4.1 *Sngon 'gro* and its features in the contemporary context

Sngon 'gro refers to preliminary practice before entering main practice during retreat. In this case, it is the annually conducted training and teaching at the monastery, which gathers great numbers of laypeople. Most participants generally do not enter main practice the way that monks in *sgrub grwa*¹² do. At *Skyang tshang*, *Sngon 'gro* starts at the beginning of October and ends in December, when the climate turns severely cold and most people cannot work outside. Under the instruction of the *lopon* as the *Rtsa ba'i bla ma* (“root lama”), they engage in various physical and mental exercises.

Sngon 'gro in *Skyang tshang* is mainly based on the *A khrid* system. *A khrid* is one of the three major systems of Bonpo *rdzogs chen* called *A snyan rdzogs gsum*.¹³ Among them, it is known for its well-organized system, which is easier for novices to practice. Its origin can be traced back to *Rme'u dgongs mjad ri khrod chen po* (1038–1096) and *Bru rgyal ba g.yung drung* (1242–90), who systematized the process of practice into *A khrid thun mtshams bco lnga* (“The fifteen sessions of *A khrid*”) (Kværne 1973). This text is still broadly used among *Bon* monasteries and retreat centers.

In the case of *Skyang tshang* monastery, in recent years, actual practice has also been taught on the basis of *Bka' lung rgya mtsho*, written by *Shar rdza bkra shis rgyal mtshan* (1858–1934), and *Sgrib sbyong skor bzhi'i sgom bzlas tshogs khrid kyi rim pa gsal bar bkod pa gzhan phan nyi ma'i 'od zer*, written by his disciple, *Bbra ston btsun pa bskal bzang bstan rgyal* (1897–1959). In addition to this, a small booklet, “*Sngon 'gro'i ngag 'don*” (“Chanting for preliminary practice”) which is specially prepared for

¹² An intensive course of retreat that includes meditation and tantric practice and that usually lasts three years. Along with *bshad grwa*, which means “scriptural studies,” it serves as an important base of monastic education.

¹³ *A khrid*, *Zhang zhung snyan rgyud*, and *Rdzogs chen yang rtse klong chen*. These systems and a number of other isolated works form *rdzogs chen* in the Bonpo tradition (Karmay 1988: 201–205).

the practice is distributed to all participants. This booklet includes prayers and mantras for the practice, and they are written in Tibetan with phonetic transcription in Chinese characters.

The practice basically consists of *Sngon 'gro'i 'bum dgu*, teaching, and *'Pho ba*. In 2009, approximately 130 people participated in the entire process, during which they are first required to do *Sngon 'gro'i 'bum dgu* (“Nine hundred thousand for preliminary practice”): to repeat nine kinds of practice¹⁴ for two months at home, ideally one hundred thousand times each. Then in the middle of December, over 1,800 people from all around Shar-khog gather in the area in front of the monastery’s assembly hall to listen to teachings by the *lopon* and to chant prayers and mantras together. The teachings are mainly based on the texts mentioned above but also include more-familiar examples such as episodes quoted from popular TV programs in order to explain common values such as compassion and altruism. After that, the people who have participated from the beginning engage in the practice of *'Pho ba*. They learn special physical and mental techniques to achieve the transfer of the soul from the top of the head. On the final day, they together make a pilgrimage to the holy mountain *Byang bya dur*, which is a few kilometers away from the monastery.

The scale of this assembly has increased since the 2000s, in parallel with economic development and the vitalization of religious activity at the monastery. It is said that *Sngon 'gro* was regarded as a practice only for old people before the 1950s, and there were few participants until the 1990s. However, the number of younger participants has greatly increased in recent years. Though the actual reasons for this should be considered from various angles, some points can be noted at present. First, the *lopon* who took up his position in 1999 has earned a great reputation in this decade. He became not only a skilled teacher for younger monks but also a spiritual leader of laypeople through his altruistic personality. Some young people have reported that their attitudes toward life changed after listening to the teachings. They also noted that they could think only about gaining property, and that they had sometimes cheated others for that purpose, but that later they had come to realize that a good attitude in this life is connected to happiness in the next life. Thus the rapid changes of daily life brought about by economic development are linked in some ways to the need for religious practice and a spiritual leader.

¹⁴ *Sems bskyed* (“arousing Bodhicitta”), *Skyabs 'gro* (“refuge”), *Snying po rnam gsum* (“three kinds of heart mantra”), *Phyag* (“bow”), *MaN Tal* (“Mandala offerings”), *Yig rgya* (“mantra of one hundred syllables”), and *Bla ma'i rnal 'byor* (“Guru yoga”).



Plate: People gathered at the practice of *Sngon 'gro* (December, 2009)

4.2 The local history represented in prayers

Although the doctrine behind the practice is mostly common, each monastery has its own lineage of transmission, which clearly represents the regionality of *Bon*. Here we consider a booklet, “*Sngon gro'i ngag 'don*,” as an example and analyze the subject of prayers. During practice, every day the participants recite *gsol ba 'debs* (“prayers”) to the lineage masters of the teachings. In addition to this, the *lopon* speaks about episodes of each master's deeds. Through this process, they share a common historical background centered on the traditions of *Skyang tshang* monastery.

The table below shows the masters to whom prayers are dedicated from an excerpt of “*Sngon gro'i ngag 'don*.” Although not all of the figures have been identified so far, the list reveals some of the regionality of the transmission. First, the lineage begins with *Rgyal ba gshen rab*, or *Gshen rab mi bo* (No. 1), followed by *Li shu stag ring* (No. 2), who spread the teachings of *Dzogchen* from '*Ol mo lung ring*, *Stong rgyung mthu chen* (No. 3) of Zhangzhung, and *Dran pa nam mkha'* and his two sons (Nos. 4–6), who were the influential masters in Tibet in the eighth century and who represent the history of the spread of *yungdrung Bon* that contemporary Bonpos broadly share. Second, the masters of Amdo appear: as mentioned before, *Skyang 'phags* (No. 7), *Do 'phags* (No. 8), and *Gtso 'phags* (No. 9) are essential saints in the history of *Bon* in Amdo.

Next is *Rje btsun ri khrod pa* or *Rme'u dgongs mjod ri khrod chen po* (No. 10), who first organized the *A khrid* cycle. Following him, several masters are praised who

formed the *Sman ri* tradition, such as *Shes rab rgyal mtshan* (No. 12) and *Sang rgyas mi gzugs sprul* or *Zla ba rgyal mtshan* (No. 16), who was from Shar-khog. *Rgyal ba dbang ldan* (No. 18) was from *Snang zhig* monastery and had stayed in Shar-khog. Then, *Mang kha wer zhi*, or *Shar rdza bkra shis rgyal mtshan* (No. 22) appeared. Here the celebrated masters known among central and eastern Tibet are mentioned.

Finally the masters who are particularly related with the history of *Skyang tshang* monastery appear. *Ngag dbang rnam rgyal* (No. 21) and *Tshul khrim rnam dag* (No. 23) are of *Mkhar yag* lineage, which is one of the important lineages in the descent of lamas in Shar-khog. *Bstan pa tshul khrims* (No. 26) is the 15th abbot, who reconstructed the monastery in its present location in 1916. Along with *Lung rtogs rgya mtsho* (No. 24) and *Shes rab blo ldan* (No. 25), he is one of the masters of *Smra dbang bstan blo* (No. 27), the 17th abbot *Bstan 'dzin blo gros rgya mtsho*. *Shes rab rnam dag* is actually the former name of the 33th abbot of *Sman ri* monastery, used when he studied at *Skyang tshang* as a disciple of *Bstan 'dzin blo gros rgya mtsho*. This name is peculiar to this monastery.

Thus, the participants of *Sngon 'gro* confirm the monastery's own history through chanting the masters' names and listening to various stories about them. Because the *lopon* repeatedly instructed people that "giving prayers to the lamas also means knowing the history here," the practice is an important process of realizing their own tradition.

Table: Masters to whom prayers are dedicated

No	Name	No	Name	No.	Name
1	Rgyal ba gshen rab	11	Mu la rad na	21	Ngag dbang rnam rgyal
2	Snya chen li shu stag ring	12	Shes rab rgyal mtshan	22	Mang kha wer zhi
3	Stong rgyung mthu chen	13	Shes rab dgong rje	23	Tshul khrim rnam dag
4	Dran pa nam mkha'	14	Gyung drung phun tshogs	24	Lung rtogs rgya mtsho
5	Tshe dbang rig 'dzin	15	Nam mkha' rgyal mtshan	25	Shes rab blo ldan
6	Pad ma mthong grol	16	Sangs rgyas mi gzugs sprul	26	Bstan pa tshul khrims
7	Skyang 'phags	17	Zla brel mkhan chen	27	Smra dbang bstan blo
8	Do 'phags	18	Rgyal ba dbang ldan	28	Shes rab rnam dag
9	Gtso 'phags	19	Bskal bzang nyi ma	29	Smra ba'i nyi ma
10	Rje btsun ri khrod pa	20	Phun tshogs dbang rgyal		

*Excerpted from "*Sngong gro'i ngag 'don*"

4.3 Tradition engraved into the body

For participants of *Sngon 'gro*, tradition is also experienced physically and emotionally through a strong bond with the root lama. As a monk from the monastery mentioned, “Making devotion to the root lama also means making devotion to the lamas to whom he made devotion.” Participants realize that they are tied to the continuous flow of transmission through devotion to the root lama. Therefore, they emphasize the spiritual communication with the lama and this sometimes become more important to them than the contents and meanings of the practice.

For example, a young man from a neighboring village reported, “The teaching is too difficult to understand, so I can only think of the lama and pray for him.” Not just this young man but quite a few informants believe that the most important thing to do during practice is to memorize and chant *gsol ba 'debs* for the lama. A young woman even mentioned, “If you chant this prayer for the *lopon*, it can protect you anywhere, anytime, and anyplace. But I don't know the actual meaning of it.”

The bond with the root lama is also strengthened physically and emotionally through the process of the practice. The participants actually experience a kind of transformation of their own bodies and have strong feelings of reliance on the lama. For example, after the practice of *'Pho ba*, in which they imagine their souls moving in and out of their bodies through *rtsa dbu ma* (“central channel”) by uttering “*Hig ka hig ka...*,” they feel the top parts of their heads swell and a small hole appearing. They consider that this is partly a result of practicing by themselves and partly an effect of the transcendental power of the *lopon* himself.

Next, the *lopon* as root lama puts a piece of grass called *Ka sha la*¹⁵ on the top part of each participant's head to prove the result of the practice. In this situation, participants are extremely nervous about whether the grass will stand on their heads. If the grass does not stand, it means the practice was not successful because of a defect of mind, which is shameful for them. When it is successful—and it is usually is—they feel satisfied and show deep appreciation to the *lopon*. This process has so powerful an impact that some participants even assume that the word *rtsa ba'i bla ma* just means “a lama who puts grass on people's heads.”¹⁶

Additionally, the bond is developed not only in extraordinary situations such as the *Sngon 'gro* but also in daily life. The *lopon* usually opens the door to his room for

¹⁵ *Saccharum spontaneum*; native to south Asia, it grows naturally along the Tibetan plateau. It is also usually used for various rituals.

¹⁶ This may also be caused by confusion between the words *rtsa* (root) and *rtsva* (grass).

people who come to consult him regarding any troubles concerning daily life. In addition to his knowledge and skills at religious practice, his personality is often the source of his good reputation. Some people admire him for having a *bdag med* (“egoless”) personality because he mostly does not have a notion of possession and gives all of his resources to others. Thus these factors together support the lama-disciple relationship that is shared and inherited by the people and that consequently constitutes an essential element of tradition in *Skyang tshang*.

5. Conclusion

This paper has considered the present situation of the *Bon* religion in Shar-khog from the perspective of actual practice. Backed by the rapid social and economic changes of the last thirty years, religious practice at *Skyang tshang* monastery and in the village community has been reintroduced. In recent years in particular, people's interest has shifted to the maintenance and development of the religious activities around the monastery. Whereas a number of previous studies clarified the meaning and historical details of the word *Bon*, this study tried to grasp what are actually regarded as the traditions that are worth continuing and passing down for the Bonpos living in contemporary Amdo.

The history of *Bon* in Shar-khog has not developed in a straightforward and independent way but through the continuous interaction between monasteries in different regions. Through this process, we can observe both the universal and the regional aspects of *Bon* that have developed side by side and influenced each other. Although the concept of *Bon*, which features organized knowledge and systems of practice, is shared among regions, the way of transmission varies according to the relationships between influential masters.

Apart from historical figures, laypeople have also continued to live as Bonpo in the contemporary situation. Although they do not transmit advanced knowledge concerning *Bon* as specialists, as do scholar monks and supermundane practitioners, they share basic religious values and their own local history. That precisely constitutes the tradition they maintain.

Through the case of *Sngon 'gro*, we can clearly observe a dynamism of confirming and passing down tradition by its participants. Although the knowledge behind the practice has mostly been passed down in the form of religious texts, participants actually experience it physically and emotionally through extreme practice. In particular, the strong bond between the lama and the disciples functions as the axis throughout the

entire practice. It is continuously reinforced not only in extraordinary situations but also in daily communication, in connection with the need for a spiritual leader among people who are facing various difficulties in the age of rapid social and economic change. Thus people in Shar-khog are motivated to maintain their tradition as Bonpos in the contemporary conditions in western China.

The theme of this paper is widely opened to further studies. First, as a study of contemporary Tibetan society, the relationship between rapid socioeconomic transitions and functions of traditional religion within them should be considered from various aspects. Second, the study of the *Bon* religion is concerned with the larger problem of the regionality of *Bon* within Tibet. Furthermore, the problem of inherited value, such as local history and the lama-disciple relationship, is not peculiar to *Bon*. Through a comparison of Buddhism and other traditions, the anthropological perspective on Tibetan religion can be certainly expanded. These all remain challenges for the future.

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